

Do I Really Have to Believe *That*? Theology Gone Awry

Do I Really Have to Believe in Predestination?

Ephesians 1:3-14

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

January 17, 2021

Last week we talked about creationism and a literal, fundamentalist view of scripture. Do you really have to believe in all that to call yourself a Christian? As a reminder, or in case you missed last week — no. No, you don't have to believe that God created the world and everything in it in seven concrete days. You can — you can choose to interpret scripture that way — but you don't have to, and I'd go so far as to say you might miss out on an awful lot what the Bible has to offer if you do.

That conversation from last week matters deeply, so much so that it takes place in the larger Christian tradition, not just within our Presbyterian circles. This week, however, our conversation moves closer to home. Predestination is almost always tied to Presbyterians. For better or worse, it is one of the legacies of John Calvin, a French theologian commonly considered to be one of the earliest forefathers of our Presbyterian tradition, so much so that in every single new members class I have ever taught, from Michigan to Kansas City to New York City to here in Columbia, the question always comes up: I don't have to believe in predestination ... do I?

I'll show my hand early again this week: no. No, you don't have to believe in predestination to be a faithful Christian. But, and I may be speaking just for myself here, if I'm going to say "no, I don't believe in something," especially something so tightly tied to my own tradition, I want to make sure I

understand exactly what it is.

In the case of predestination, it may be easier to start with what it isn't.

Predestination is not the idea that we live our lives as puppets, that every moment of our lives is predetermined before it happens. As if our actions and circumstances are not our own responsibility but rather the result of God pulling strings according to a choreographed script.

A friend of mine was late to a meeting once. He flew through the door several minutes after we had begun and said, by way of introducing himself, "I'm sorry. I'm Presbyterian. I was predestined to be late," as if his tardiness had nothing to do with his oversleeping that morning, as if his oversleeping had nothing to do with his staying up too late the night before, as if staying up to late had nothing to do with ... well, you see what I mean.

Now yes, absolute and without question, God is within every moment of our lives, God brings meaning to every circumstance of our lives, and God redeems every brokenness in our lives. But God does not predetermine every step of our lives.

And again, just for the record, that's not what predestination is all about anyway. I mention it only because it's one of the most common misunderstandings of an already tricky doctrine. What follows is my attempt to summarize what predestination actually is with both theology integrity and some reasonable degree of brevity.

Predestination claims two things: first, that God is how and why we have life; and second, that God not only calls us into life now, but also invites us into eternal salvation later. Here's how that doctrine came to be.

One of the biggest theological shifts to come out of the Protestant Reformation was toward the concept of unmerited grace. We cannot earn God's favor. We cannot buy God's favor. We cannot negotiate or bargain for God's favor. God's favor, God's grace — simply is. And for John Calvin, he believed so fervently in God's grace, he believed everything good about humans is a result of that grace — that without such grace, we are actually, fundamentally pretty wretched beings.

He called that "total depravity." Sinfulness permeates every facet of our being, he believed, except, thanks to God, grace shows up and saves us from ourselves. Whatever salvation we know, in this life or the next, comes only and exclusively from God's abundant grace. Grace that comes to us not because we do anything to deserve it, but because God loves us so much, God just can't help himself.

That's where all of our stalwart Reformed theologians ever since Calvin have rushed in to defend him — to reassure those of us who raise an eyebrow at the whole idea that love really is ultimately what predestination is all about.

Calvin truly did believe he was crafting a doctrine of comfort. And to some extent, he was right. I find great, great relief in the idea that eternity lies in God's hands, not ours. That God's love for us is so great, our lives are ultimately in God's control, not ours. Our human history suggests that this is mighty good news.

But this is where Calvin ran into a significant problem. He couldn't help but notice that some people kept acting in ways that suggested they were not aware of God's grace

in their lives. What to make of this? If God's strong and saving grace really was imbued in everyone, how could some people still act so poorly?

Calvin was adamant that grace could not be subverted in any way by mere humans like us. And the only way he could continue to hold that high view of grace was to conclude that if someone did not believe in God, or did not live in a way that reflected God, well, then, *that* had to be rooted in God's will, as well. This resulted in his declaration that "God in his sovereignty and for the glory of his justice passed over some people and in condemnation of their sin ordained them to eternal death."¹

That is officially known as double predestination: some are destined for heaven while others are destined for hell. It is unofficially known as the point at which he loses most people, even, or maybe especially, most Presbyterians.

It does bring me some measure of comfort to know that the second half of all this, the double part of predestination, came not from Calvin's understanding of God, but from his inability to reconcile his observations of humanity with his understanding of God. That's a struggle I can relate to. I imagine many of you can, too. But even still: I simply can't take predestination as far as Calvin does.

Let me tell you two stories that illustrate what I *do* believe about predestination. Because our reading today does in fact say, "In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will."

It was nearly 12 years ago now that I was studying for the same exams that our new pastoral assistant, Hannah, will take next week — ordination exams. Y'all pray for her — they are no walk in the park. But lo those many years ago, I was studying with my friend Berry. Berry

¹ John Leith, summarizing Calvin in *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, page 102.

and I are dear friends, even to this day. We are also about as different as can be. Berry is tall; I am short. He is an off-the-charts extrovert; I am a textbook introvert. Our study habits were similarly disparate. Where I studied content, Berry studied strategy.

One of my enduring memories of seminary will forever be Berry standing on a table in the no-talking-please Reading Room, declaring at full volume, "In life and in death, we belong to God. Jenny McDevitt, that is all you need to know. Whatever question is asked, that is the answer. In life and in death, we belong to God." Having finished his sermon on the table, he left the library to go for a run. I continued to study doctrines and creeds. But you better believe that two days later, as I sat writing my theology exam, every one of my answers did, in fact, include the promise, "In life and in death, belong to God." To this day, it is one of the gospel truths I cling to with every fiber of my being. Because "God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world ... In love, God destined us for adoption as his children."

I would learn even more about that from another friend. We stood in the hallway of the Assembly Inn at Montreat, of all places, as tears ran down her face. She was no stranger to tears: her struggles with infertility seemed to define her life. Months turned into years as she prayed and waited, as she endured agonizing medical procedures and yet: no child. But this time they were tears of joy. She had just received a phone call. She and her husband had just been chosen as adoptive parents for a little infant no more than a few minutes old.

Everything was happening so fast there was almost no further information available. Was their child a boy or a girl? She didn't know. Was the child black or white or brown? She didn't know. Would the child gravitate to music, or revel in math? She didn't know. Would the child quietly follow rules or look for every loophole? She didn't know. She didn't know

any of that. All she knew was that she was going to be a mother. Her love for that child was a decision her heart made instantly, and there was nothing that child needed to do, nothing that child could do, to ever change that.

I believe predestination is something like that.

And I think — or maybe I just hope — that if Calvin were alive today, he'd agree. I think he would, because it really is true to the initial premise of predestination. Where it all went wrong, at least as I understand it, was when he doubled down with double predestination, in order to reconcile things that seemed irreconcilable. The thing is, a life of faith always requires embracing things we do not fully understand. And all due respect to Calvin, forced reconciliation is not faithful reconciliation. Forced reconciliation takes things — or ideas — or people — that cannot hold the same space together and warps one of them until it fits the other. Faithful reconciliation is messy and hard and painful and slow, but it honors the integrity of everything — everyone — involved.

I can't help but wonder if we as a country in the weeks and months to come, will reach for the low-hanging fruit of forced reconciliation, or if we will dive deep into the work of faithful reconciliation. If we will keep saying, "This is not who we are." If we will keep saying, "We are not racist. I am not racist." If we will keep saying, "We need to come together and heal and move on." Or if we will acknowledge that while what we have witnessed is not who we want to be as Americans, it is who we have been, and it is who we are right now. If we will acknowledge that racism is part of the air we breathe, the laws we pass, and the stories we inherit. If we will acknowledge that unity without accountability will not hold, not in any meaningful sort of way.

I don't know what it looks like — not all of it. I don't with whom we might partner or

what our leadership might commit to or what ideas might emerge. I can't know all that, not fully, not yet. But I do know that as disciples of Jesus Christ we are always called to the work that is faithful, no matter how hard or messy or painful it may be.

A couple of years ago, back in New York, I attended Auburn Seminary's Lives of Commitment breakfast, an event honoring five women for their exemplary moral courage. It is where I first heard Stacy Abrams speak and knew it wouldn't be the last time I heard her speak. But it was one of the other honorees, Shifra Bronznick, who said something I've never forgotten. She said she lives her life by this code: "When there are no human beings in the room, or at the table, or in the discussion ... be the human being." She says there are plenty of ways to live our lives, but to be the one who consistently speaks out of love of neighbor is the only way to be truly human.

And I remember watching my nephew Logan play on his soccer team back when he was about four years old. On more than one occasion, he or another player would wander outside the lines marking the field and get entirely distracted by something. When this would happen, the parents would laugh. "Logan's not playing soccer anymore!" "Danielle's not playing soccer anymore!" You see, those kids were free to wander outside the bounds of the game, but once they'd done that, they weren't playing soccer anymore.

In a similar sort of way, we can choose to live our lives as if we are not defined by unmerited grace. We can. We do it all the time. But as God's children, ones who are destined and adopted, redeemed and forgiven, marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit ... when we live our lives in ways that do not reflect that grace, well, we're out of bounds when we do that. We aren't being human anymore when we do that.

Do you have to believe in predestination? No. Are you a terrible person if you do believe in predestination? No. And

either way, what has always been predestined about your life is this: you are loved by the almighty God, maker of heaven and earth. There is no power anywhere that can ever change that, not for you or for anyone else. So the greatest and most faithful response to that kind of love is to live every moment of your life like you believe *that*.